

From Carbon Democracy to the Right to the City: On the Struggle Against Neoliberalism

Recommend 414 people recommend this. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends recommend.

[Tweet](#) 26

by [Koenraad Bogaert](#)

Mar 14 2014

[Listen](#)

In his book *Carbon Democracy*, Timothy Mitchell analyses the interrelation between, on the one hand, the historical development of energy from fossil fuels and, on the other hand, the rise of democratic mass politics. The rise of coal in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made especially the industrial revolution and the development of the modern capitalist city possible. The socio-technical world built around these industrial flows of energy also provided the means for assembling effective democratic claims. Coal was the essential energy source of the industrial society. Yet, the specific infrastructure built around coal energy was vulnerable in particular ways. This infrastructure brought together large concentrations of coalmine workers, railwaymen, and dockworkers who acquired the tremendous power to *sabotage* the lifeblood of industrial society. Their control over energy and the usage of the general strike as their political instrument made class struggle effective and successful. Sabotage refers to the slowing down or interruption of the normal functioning of a *critical* process.[1] Especially the miners obtained a key position. As Mitchell states:



[Anarchist demonstration in Barcelona, 1 May 2013. Image by Koenraad Bogaert.]

the flow and concentration of energy made it possible to connect the demands of miners to those of others, and to give their arguments a technical force that could not easily be ignored. Strikes became effective, not because of mining's isolation, but on the contrary because of the flows of carbon that connected chambers beneath the ground to every factory, office, home or means of transportation that depended on steam or electric power.

The growing strength of an industrial labour movement and the pressure it was able to exert eventually played a crucial role in the emergence of the political project of the Keynesian welfare state and the different forms of anti-colonial state developmentalism in the postcolonial world. However, the class compromise of the post-war settlement also succeeded in preventing a further radicalization of labour movements. Again, the technical infrastructure built around energy played an important role. The shift from coal to oil, introduced in Europe through the Marshall plan, not only radically altered the structuring dynamics of industrial capitalism, it also negatively affected the power of organized labour. The production and transport of oil was much less labour intensive. Pumping up oil required workers to stay above ground, which meant they were easier to supervise. The expertise of the coalminer in exploiting energy resources shifted to the technical knowledge of geologists and engineers. Additionally, the invention of the pipeline reduced the ability of workers to interrupt the flow of energy. Furthermore, the invention of the oil tanker and large-scale container ships contributed to the restriction of unionized power. The oil tanker facilitated control over energy supply and made it more flexible. If a strike broke out in one place, an oil tanker could immediately change its course and supply itself somewhere else. Standard "containerisation" allowed rail, road, and over sea to transport goods without being too dependent upon human labour to unload, stack, and reload. A convenient form of economic rationalization as shipping and docking stations were among the most important sites for labour unrest. But the container did more than just limit the power of dockworkers. It contributed to the transformation of capitalist organization in fundamental ways: "Combined with the cheap oil of the 1960s, it made possible the moving of manufacturing overseas." [2] Industrial production could now be outsourced more easily to low-wage countries.

The preceding two paragraphs describe very briefly what Mitchell understands as carbon democracy and the way the interrelation between democratic politics and energy has changed fundamentally in the course of the twentieth century. Two important lessons can be drawn here.[3] First of all, Mitchell demonstrates that the effectiveness of resistance depends not only on the organizing capacity of protest movements, but also on their ability to successfully exploit the weak spots of capitalist organization and the vulnerabilities within energy supply chains, or more generally within infrastructural support systems. Secondly, he also shows that effective resistance to capitalist domination has an impact on how capitalism itself changes its structuring dynamics. As a result, successful techniques of protest may not

only accomplish important gains (e.g. the redistribution of wealth through welfare mechanisms), they are also vulnerable in a transformed capitalist environment, when capitalists find new modes of government and organization which make certain modalities of resistance less effective or even useless. This fact may put pressure again on certain achievements and social privileges. This is exactly what we have seen during the neoliberal political order of the last thirty years, with the repeated defeats of organized labour. These two lessons urge any movement that wishes to resist capitalist exploitation and domination to recognize the importance of understanding the constant changing nature of capitalist organization and power. New forms of domination and exploitation require new techniques and strategies of resistance.

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) understood this very well. It could even seem that Lefebvre read *Carbon Democracy* before Mitchell wrote it! Already in the early 1970s, he anticipated Mitchell's suggestion that in our contemporary societies the techniques of resistance used by coalminers, or more broadly, those used by factory workers to sabotage production processes through strikes, etc., were not as effective as they used to be. This insight was based on his critical understanding of a continuously changing capitalist society. Lefebvre also tried to come up with an alternative project: *the right to the city*. Many critical thinkers are today inspired by Lefebvre's concept and discuss its relevance. David Harvey, for example, describes the right to the city as "a right to change ourselves by changing the city." He sees it as a collective right rather than an individual one, "since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization."^[4]

However, on many occasions, the concept of the right to the city is interpreted too narrowly and therefore risks losing its emancipatory appeal and radical character. If we go back to Lefebvre's original text, he presents the right of the city, above all, as a political project and a radical critique of our contemporary society. Lefebvre did not have some legal concept in mind that could be meticulously marked out and inscribed in our texts of law. Lefebvre's concept was not meant to be just an equal right. After all, "between equal rights, force decides" as Marx—a major inspiration for Lefebvre—famously stated.^[5] According to Lefebvre, the right to the city is above all a *practice*,^[6] one that cannot be disconnected from social struggle. Lefebvre develops the notion of the right to the city in his homonymic book *Le droit à la ville* in 1968. Yet, in order to better understand what he had in mind, we should situate this book within his larger intellectual project on urbanization. In his next book, *La révolution urbaine*, in 1970, he traces the dynamics of a longer historical process, namely the political and social dynamics of ever increasing urbanization. This historical process of urbanization reflects, he tells us, the transformation of human society from agrarian to industrial to, finally, urban. He links this evolution to a shift in the territorial form of the city, i.e. the transformation of the original polis (the political city) to a merchant city, then to an industrial city, and finally to the contemporary neoliberal form—what Lefebvre, at the time of writing, termed a "critical phase." In this evolution towards an urban society, Lefebvre did not so much envision the emergence of global cities, like New York, London, or Shanghai, but more the actual globalization of the *urban fabric*, which is a much broader conceptualization of the urban. "This expression," he states, "does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country. In this sense, a vacation home, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric."^[7] In other words, claiming the right to the city does not end at the borders of the actual city and is not exercised exclusively by urban residents. The right to the city entails a political project for the whole society—a radical re-imagining of that society.

What Lefebvre described, back in the 1970s, as our contemporary urban society is what many critical scholars would consider today as the beginnings of neoliberal society and neoliberal urbanism. Capitalist expansion has always been closely interrelated to urbanization. Yet, the neoliberal city differs radically from the modernist city of the nineteenth century and the Fordist city of the twentieth century. Cheap oil, containerships, and eventually other materializations of the urban fabric such as highways, flying routes, and contemporary information and technology networks all contributed to the fact that the city, and not the factory, became the dominant space within contemporary capitalism. Moreover, while urban infrastructure was crucial in supporting capitalist expansion and production in the industrial age, the roles might be reversed today. Urban spaces have become highly valued consumption products and capitalism's creative and innovative nature has been demonstrated through the city's dual role: as a place of consumption and as the consumption of place—two forms of growth fuelled primarily by increasing levels of debt (both public and private) and real estate speculation.^[8] It is not a coincidence, therefore, that Lefebvre translated Marx's analysis of commodity to the city, pinpointing that neoliberal urbanization entailed privileging the *exchange value* of the urban space over and above its *use value*. Moreover, while the modernist projects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had industrialization as their highest priority, contemporary urban society placed "financialization" and free mobility of capital as its first primacies. The realization of these new priorities depends on radical changes within the urban fabric and, consequently, qualitative changes in capitalist organization require radically new insights to grasp the urban phenomenon, not only as a production of capitalist relations, but also as a producer of new conditions for capital accumulation. The modern city is "not the passive place of production or the concentration of capital, but that of the urban intervening as such in production (in the means of production)."^[9]

To make the link here with Mitchell's analysis, Lefebvre wants to understand the contemporary weak spots and vulnerabilities in neoliberal capitalist globalization and urbanization. It is not the coalmines, the railroads, nor the factory in general that represent the bottlenecks of neoliberal capitalism, but the city itself does. This does not mean

that social struggle over industrial production becomes redundant, but that the flexibility of capital and capitalism can overcome losses in production spaces, amongst others by **recovering its losses in the living space** (the urban) through rising rents of all kinds or by moving production altogether to somewhere else. The vital issue today is the same as in the early twentieth century: effective struggle needs to interrupt the lifeblood of the capitalist system. Only the nature of this lifeblood has changed radically. As such, the right to the city is not just a project to claim back the individual city, but rather a revolutionary ideal to liberate society from capitalist oppression, recognizing that it has to start from within the city, targeting the crucial infrastructures of neoliberal and financial globalization.[10] It represents a struggle that transcends the limits of the nation-state and liberal democracy as a *national* system. It is a radical project based on a process of appropriation, “enabling the full and complete usage” of the city. It requires “the mastery of the economic (of exchange value, the market, and commodities) and consequently is inscribed within the perspectives of the revolution under the hegemony of the working class.”[11] For Lefebvre, just like Marx argued a hundred years ago, the working class remains the primary agent of radical change. However, it is important to emphasize that he gave a very broad interpretation of the working class. They are all those who *inhabit* and suffer the segregation, misery, and domination of neoliberal class strategies. Put in a contemporary context, it not only comprises the labour force, but also the exploited illegal migrants, the urban outcasts, the evicted home-owners, the squatters, the jobless youth, the discriminated women, the dispossessed indigenous people, the small business and shop owners ousted by the Walmarts and Monsantos of this world, etc. This broad class of urban citizens contrasts sharply with “the Olympians of the new bourgeois aristocracy [who] *no longer inhabit* [and who] go from grand hotel to grand hotel, or from castle to castle, commanding a fleet or a country from a yacht, [who] are everywhere and nowhere” (Italics added).[12]

Obviously, the crucial question is how do we translate this revolutionary project of the right to the city into concrete action on the ground? One might wonder what Lefebvre would have to say about the current intensification of social struggle all over the world. Does the way in which Tahrir became a worldwide symbol for resistance and solidarity entail a beginning of something Lefebvre had in mind? Can we consider what started with the Arab uprisings as the seeds of a growing **revolution** against **neoliberalism**? Two elements suggest that events since 2011 can be seen as a claim to the right of the city in the Lefebvrian sense. First of all, the occupations of Tahrir and Avenue Bourguiba quickly spread, not only to the rest of the Arab world, but worldwide. The struggles continued at Plaza del Sol, Zucotti Park, Syntagma, Taksim, and many other urban places around the world. In this regard, the occupations were more than just about reclaiming individual cities or defying domestic regimes. The demands of Arab people resonated in the rest of the world. Ideas and practices were shared everywhere—which does not mean, of course, they were identical or homogenous. Secondly, the occupation of *public* space across the world—or privately owned public space in the case of Zucotti Park—symbolically attacked the core issue of the neoliberal project, namely the tendency to privatize everything. In this sense, the occupations had a radical character. Moreover, the very idea of “occupying Wall Street” aimed—in discourse at least—at sabotaging the financial infrastructure that supplies neoliberal globalization with its necessary energy: capital.

But is this enough? There are some critical issues to be raised here. Up until today, these occupations did not yet succeed—maybe with the exception of a few struggles in the Arab world—to alter, let alone fundamentally challenge, existing power relations. Some of the critiques of the Occupy movement point to just that: “**Occupy is all play and no power.**” Both Lefebvre and Mitchell emphasize that the main driving force for change is confrontation, not compromise. The very alliance of coalminers, railwaymen, and dockworkers gave exceptional power to confront. Yet, where does that power lie today? Confronting neoliberal power also means that the issue of **violence** has to be taken seriously. Not in the sense of a means to achieve certain goals, but as a reality of revolutionary struggle. When the ruling power is really threatened, violence will be provoked. We have seen this in squares across cities, where protesters faced water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and much worse in some cases. Likewise, the history of mass democracy equally turned violent in many occasions before real changes were realized. Today, from Tahrir to Taksim and around the world, the occupiers of public space have exposed the violent structures that organize their societies, precisely by refusing to leave without struggle. Nevertheless, this violence can be devastating for resistance if it sinks into seemingly dead-ends, as seen in the geopolitical swamp of Syria and the military repression in Egypt. In other words, it is highly probable that the continuous endurance of violence and repression ends in disaster, if occupiers cannot face it with real power to sabotage.

The issues of violence, power and confrontation thus leave us with two important sets of questions for the future of resistance. First, with regard to the occupiers themselves: Is the mere power of numbers enough? More importantly, how do we put occupation in practice? Occupation demands enduring dedication, time, and resources. Therefore, how do we combine occupation with the most important needs of everyday life? Can occupiers be **Superman by night and Clark Kent by day**, “defiantly marching through evening teargas and returning to work the following day?” Can there be an occupation of public space at all, without the occupation of the workplace? Second, with regard to the techniques of sabotage: How do we deal with the radically different nature of contemporary capitalism’s most important infrastructures? How do we expose the materiality of the seemingly immaterial networks of financial flows and sabotage the very real physical and urban infrastructure that underpins it? Moreover, can the occupation of some cities be successful without the occupation of others? Do we all have the same responsibilities in this “global” movement or phenomenon? As Mitchell reminds us in the case of the government of oil energy, “governing the global supply of oil,

like most things that we call 'global', rested on the control of a comparatively small number of sites—a few dozen major oilfields, pipelines, and terminals, and the handful of tanker fleets that journeyed between them.”[13] What does this say about our global cities? About the command centers of neoliberal capitalism, those few sites, those financial centers that are crucial in the government of international capital flow? What does it say about the responsibility of the inhabitants of these centers? Do they have a greater responsibility? Are other sites dependent on their solidarity? On their cooperation? Or even on their leadership? Finally, is this not the most difficult task lying ahead, namely that the right to the city implies changing society by taking over much more than just one city, by acting locally but within a global movement?[14]

Endnotes:

- [1] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political power in the age of oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 21-22.
- [2] *Ibid.*, 153-4.
- [3] In the remainder of the book, Mitchell elaborates on the methods of governing democracies and global capitalism that coincided with the exploitation of oil resources and its crucial role in providing energy to capitalist organization and production processes. However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss these aspects.
- [4] David Harvey, "The right to the city," *New Left Review* 53 (2008), 23.
- [5] Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), 344.
- [6] Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (eds.), *Henri Lefebvre: Writings on cities*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 143.
- [7] Henri Lefebvre, *The urban revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 3.
- [8] Kofman and Lebas, 73.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 109-110.
- [10] David Harvey is one of the leading social theorists today who tries to work and think with the concept of the right to the city as a revolutionary ideal in the Lefebvrian sense. For a more elaborate discussion on some of the issues raised here see: David Harvey, *Rebel Cities* (London: Verso, 2012).
- [11] Kofman and Lebas, 179.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 159.
- [13] Mitchell, 67.
- [14] David Harvey in *Rebel Cities* deals with many of these questions, albeit from a slightly different point of view.

Latest posts in **Cities**:



[Trente ans de recherche sur Tunis et les grandes villes tunisiennes](#)



[Bourj Hammoud: Seeing the City's Urban Textures and Layered Pasts](#)

If you prefer, email your comments to info@jadaliyya.com.

randreas202 (signed in using yahoo)

Coal Industrial Labor Relations and Nuclear Energy

... Thatcher's situation was particularly strained in that she wanted to discharge tens of thousands of coal miners, replacing them with politically poisonous nuclear power plants. This feat would require an overriding fear, something that calls for the public to acquiesce and reserve their strong objections. There would be no way to sell such policies to the public without resorting to a paradigm changing ruse, one that defines any dissidence as a danger to the safety of society. ... Full article:

<http://alethonews.wordpress.com/2009/12/03/theres-more-to-climate-fraud-than-just-tax-hikes/>

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · March 14 at 6:39am

Facebook social plugin

Jadaliyya

- [About Jadaliyya](#)
- [Jadaliyya Team](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Contact Information](#)

Contributions

- [Submission Guidelines](#)
- [Release Form](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Terms of Service](#)

Pages/Sections

- [Culture](#)
- [Reports](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Jad Navigation](#)
- [O.I.L.](#)

Features


- [Roundtables](#)
- [Essential Readings](#)
- [Photo Essays](#)

Pedagogy Section

- [Pedagogy Homepage](#)

القسم العربي

- [Arabic Section](#)
- [Arabic-Culture](#)
- [Arabic-Politics](#)
- [Arabic-Economics](#)
- [Arabic-History](#)

 ©2010-2014 by the Arab Studies Institute. All Rights Reserved.
info@jadaliyya.com
site by conception [design](#)